

A Reinterpretation of the Heart Sutra

Based on Progressive Stages of “Emptiness”

Abstract: “Emptiness” is the core doctrine of Buddhism, but different Buddhist schools do not interpret emptiness in the same way. Theravada Buddhism holds that the self does not exist, but the external world does exist. Mind-Only school holds that only the mind exists, and the external world does not really exist. Madhyamaka school argues that even the mind does not exist, so “all dharmas (or phenomenon) are empty”. In the process of revealing the nature of “non-self”, different from the traditional mainstream view that the individual consists of five ever-changing aggregates, we have argued that the five aggregates should be viewed as “awareness” or “consciousness” in the sense of qualia (what Mahayana Buddhism calls “mind” or “consciousness”). Therefore, we interpret “all the five aggregates are empty” at the beginning of the Heart Sutra as that even the mind (or consciousness) does not exist, the same to the view of Madhyamaka school. Furthermore, the famous verse in the Heart Sutra “Body is not different from Emptiness, and Emptiness is not different from Body; Body is just Emptiness, and Emptiness is just Body. The same is true for the Feelings, Perceptions, Mental Formations, and Consciousness.” is just the argument and explanation for above view. We further interpret it as: Consciousness cannot arise without the arising of the outer perceived object that has been proved to be empty, and the outer perceived object that has been proved to be empty cannot arise without the arising of consciousness; thus, consciousness could be regarded as the object or the object could be regarded as consciousness. Therefore, ultimately what is trying to be argued here is that consciousness is also empty and does not exist independently. This is just the same logic used by the Madhyamaka school to refute the Mind-Only school. Then, it can be seen that the true meaning of the Heart Sutra is to conclude that “all dharmas (or phenomenon) are empty” by arguing that even the mind does not exist. The other two points of view of emptiness (“non-self” and “the objects of consciousness do not exist”) were already established before this and they

are the premise and cornerstone of the Heart Sutra.

Keyword: the Heart Sutra, emptiness, the five aggregates, consciousness, non-self, Mind-Only, Madhyamaka, vipassana

1. About the Heart Sutra

The Heart Sutra is one of the most widely circulated Buddhist texts in the vast Buddhist canon because it is short, concise and easy to recite. Although the entire sutra consists of only 260 words, it summarizes the essence of Prajna wisdom and is therefore called the Heart Sutra.

Although there are many commentaries on the Heart Sutra throughout the ages, what exactly does “all the five aggregates are empty” in the opening passage mean? In particular, the famous verse “Body is not different from Emptiness, and Emptiness is not different from Body; Body is just Emptiness, and Emptiness is just Body. The same is true for the Feelings, Perceptions, Mental Formations, and Consciousness.”, seems to be tautological and puzzling.

This article attempts to interpret the Heart Sutra from a fresh perspective in order to clear up any confusion. Although the Heart Sutra is a classic of Madhyamaka, in order to truly understand the Heart Sutra, we first need to have a basic but comprehensive understanding of the core ideas and Buddhist schools.

2. The Progressive Stages of Emptiness and Different Buddhist Schools

“Emptiness” is the core doctrine of Buddhism, known as top priority of “the three marks of existence” of Buddhism. However, different Buddhist schools do not interpret emptiness in the same way.

If we use the different understanding of emptiness as the criterion for division, the entire Buddhist system can be briefly divided into three schools: Theravada, Mind-Only and Madhyamaka (Here we will not discuss Tathagatagarbha and Other-Empty for the time being).

- Theravada: Theravada Buddhism holds that the self does not exist, but the external world does exist.
- Mind-Only: Based on Theravada Buddhism, Mind-Only school holds that only the mind exists, and the external world does not really exist. It is also known as Mahayana Existence Sect.
- Madhyamaka: Madhyamaka school goes even further, arguing that even the mind does not exist, so “all dharmas (or phenomenon) are empty”. Hence it is also known as the Mahayana Emptiness Sect.

If we summarize the above three Buddhist schools in terms of a three-tier structure of “subject”, “be aware of” and “object” (e.g., “I see a snowy mountain”), Theravada Buddhism speaks of the non-existence of the subject (“I”), Mind-Only school speaks of the non-existence of the object (“snowy mountain”), and Madhyamaka school speaks of not even awareness/consciousness (“see”). (Obviously, we regard what Mahayana Buddhism calls “mind” or “consciousness” as consciousness or awareness in the modern sense.)

The Progressive Stages of Emptiness and Buddhist Schools			
	Subject	Aware/ Conscious	Object
Theravada	×	○	○
Mind-Only	×	○	×
Madhyamaka	×	×	×

3. Argument for Viewing the Five Aggregates as Awareness or Consciousness

The Heart Sutra begins by stating that "all the five aggregates are empty", so in order to understand the Heart Sutra, we must first clarify the true meaning of the five aggregates.

The Five Aggregates are one of the most central concepts in the Buddha's teachings. Yet the description and discussion of the five aggregates are vague and obscure in Sutta Piṭaka, resulting in that the five aggregates have always been a perplexing concept.

The traditional mainstream view is that the individual consists of five ever-changing aggregates: rūpa (body/form), vedanā (feelings/sensations), saññā (perceptions), saṅkhārā (mental formations/volitions) and viññāṇa (consciousness).

However, in Western Buddhist studies, many scholars such as Rupert Gethin (1986: 49), Sue Hamilton (2000: 27) and Alexander Wynne (2009: 63) have argued that the

five aggregates are not descriptions of the individual person, but descriptions of the individual's subjective experience.

Inspired by P. A. Payutto's "the law of Dependent Origination reveals how the five aggregates exist as mutual, interrelated causes and conditions." (2019: 279), we go further than considering the five aggregates as "subjective experiences", and argue that the five aggregates should be viewed directly as a stream of moments of consciousness:

For example, you suddenly smell an odor ("Six Consciousnesses") and find it unpleasant ("Feelings"), you subconsciously turn your head away ("Reactions"), and later you realize that there was a piece of horse manure there ("Perceptions")

In this way, it is clear that the aggregates are equivalent to "awareness" (or "consciousness") in the modern sense, which is what Mahayana Buddhism calls "consciousness/mind".

As we will see later, viewing the five aggregates as awareness or consciousness is a breakthrough in revealing the essence of "no-self", and is also the core of bridging the various schools of Buddhism, and the key to our reinterpretation of the Heart Sutra.

4. View of Emptiness in Theravada Buddhism

The view of emptiness in Theravada Buddhism is "non-self" which has always been a perplexing and controversial thesis. Obviously, an ideal interpretation should be able to answer two questions simultaneously: what is the essence of "non-self" and how does the illusion of self arise? (They are two sides of the same coin.)

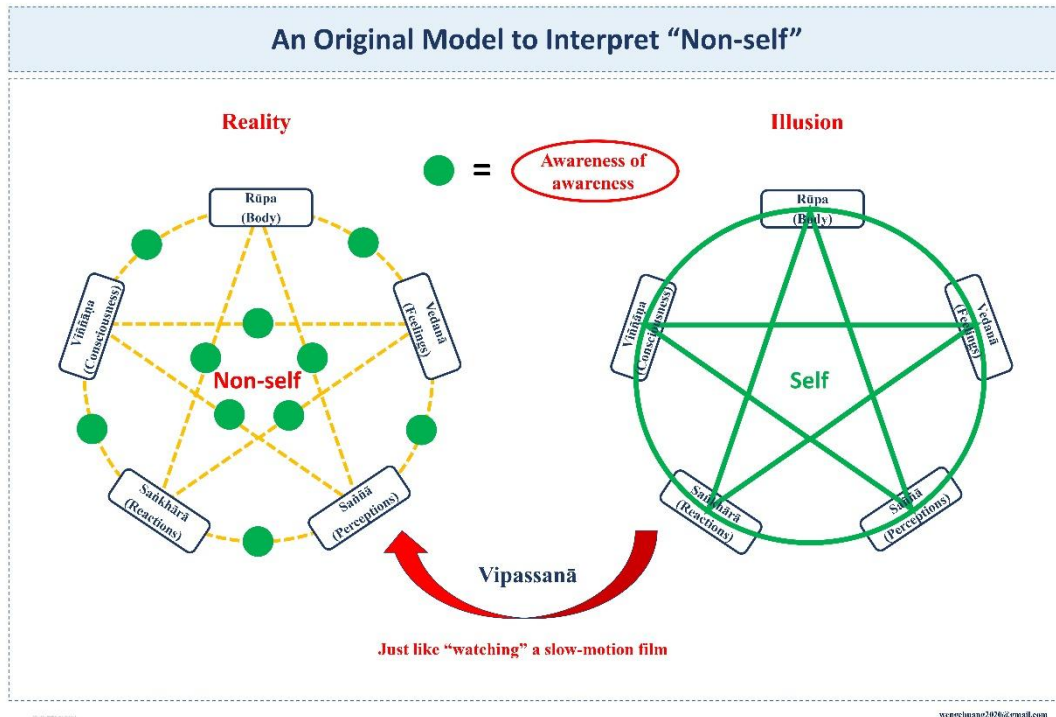
In "The Science behind Buddhist Meditation", we proposed that the nature of vipassana is enhanced awareness induced in meditation (after samadhi), which makes

contemplating the five aggregates possible, just like “watching” a slow-motion film.

According to the empirical materials of Theravada Buddhism, when we regard each aggregate as an “awareness” which is the state of being conscious of something, then contemplating the five aggregates would reveal the existence of “awareness of awareness”.

For instance, when one feels happy, one knows that one is happy. (Note that feeling happy is not the same as knowing that one feels happy.) P. A. Payutto makes this point clearly in Buddhadhamma (2019: 23-24).

Furthermore, inspired by Ajahn Brahm’s insightful “fruit salad simile” (2006: 118) which describes experiences in Theravada Buddhist meditation, we develop an original model to interpret “non-self” by introducing “awareness of awareness” out of the framework of the five aggregates: contemplating the five aggregates would discern that “awareness of awareness” arises a moment after each aggregate and they do not appear simultaneously.



Thus, it is clear that the notion that there is a constant self always there knowing or observing all aggregates just results from “awareness of awareness” appearing between any two aggregates, something that under ordinary conditions happens very quickly. (That's like a torch spinning so fast that it looks like a ring of fire.)

This would lead to the insight of “non-self”: no subject of awareness (or consciousness) at all. That’s the nature of “non-self” in Buddhism.

Intrinsically, the illusion that there is a self underlying the five aggregates intrinsically means a two-tier structure like that of Cartesian Theatre or "Cogito, ergo sum". However, the slowing down of “speed” in vipassana reveals that the reality is single-tier.

To summarize, the Theravada Buddhist concept of emptiness is that “there is no personal self underlying the five aggregates”.

5. View of Emptiness in Mind-Only versus View of Emptiness in Madhyamaka

Having established that “there is no personal self underlying the five aggregates”, the Cittamatrin now looks more deeply into the aggregates themselves.

Based on the empirical experience of Cittamatra Approach (also known as Yogacara), vipassana will further reveal that the objects of consciousness do not exist either. The seemingly outer perceived objects are merely manifestations of mind. Therefore, in the view of Mind-Only school, a mind/matter duality (i.e. the separation between the outer perceived entities and the inner perceiving consciousnesses) does not exist.

However, the Madhyamaka school does not fully subscribe to the view of the Mind-Only school; It goes one step further and argues that even the mind does not exist.

The Madhyamaka school uses reasoning to establish that consciousnesses and their objects cannot be ultimately real, because in the final analysis each arises only in dependence on the other and neither has a self-nature of its own. In other words, without consciousness there can be no object, and without object there can be no consciousness. Therefore, consciousness cannot exist independently. Please note the refutation of the Mind-Only school by the Madhyamaka school, the same logic we will find in the Heart Sutra.

6. A Reinterpretation of the Heart Sutra

First of all, as we argued earlier, the five aggregates are consciousness in the sense of qualia; therefore, what “all the five aggregates are empty” at the beginning of the Heart Sutra exactly means is that even the mind (or consciousness) does not exist, the same to the view of Madhyamaka school.

And the famous verse that follows is just the argument and explanation for this view.

However, the meaning of the word “emptiness” in the phrase “Body is not different from Emptiness, and Emptiness is not different from Body; Body is just Emptiness, and Emptiness is just Body. The same is true for the Feelings, Perceptions, Mental Formations, and Consciousness.” is different from the meaning of the word “emptiness” in the phrase “all the five aggregates are empty”, and it refers to the fact that the “objects” of “consciousness” as discovered during the Cittamatra Approach, do not exist.

Moreover, the word “different” in “Body is not different from Emptiness, and Emptiness is not different from Body” means “separate” in ancient times; “not different” means inseparable and interdependent.

Then, we further interpret this famous verse as: Consciousness cannot arise without the arising of the object that has been proved to be empty, and the object that has been proved to be empty cannot arise without the arising of consciousness; thus, consciousness could be regarded as the object or the object could be regarded as consciousness. Therefore, ultimately what is trying to be argued here is that consciousness is also empty and does not exist independently. This is the same logic used by the Madhyamaka school to refute the Mind-Only school.

This famous verse is followed by “Sariputra, all phenomena are empty.....”. It can be seen that the true meaning of the Heart Sutra is to conclude that “all dharmas (or phenomenon) are empty” by arguing that even the mind does not exist. The other two points of view of emptiness (“non-self” and “the objects of consciousness do not exist”) were already established before this and they are the premise and cornerstone of the Heart Sutra.

As for the other parts of the Heart Sutra that follow, many commentaries have been made throughout the ages without much ambiguity, so we will not dwell on them.

7. Summary on the Five Aggregates and the Progressive Stages of Emptiness

Finally, let's use the five aggregates to interpret the progressive stages of emptiness and bridge the various schools of Buddhism:

Theravada Buddhism holds that the self does not exist (namely, “there is no personal self underlying the five aggregates”), but the external world does exist.

Mind-Only school holds that only the mind exists, and the external world does not really exist (namely, “there are no objects of the five aggregates”).

Madhyamaka school argues that even the mind does not exist (namely, “all the five aggregates are empty”), so all dharmas (or phenomenon) are empty.

Furthermore, from the perspective of modern western philosophy, Theravada Buddhism is concerning “self-consciousness”, while Mahayana Buddhism is concerning “consciousness”.

As for the profound Tathagatagarbha and Other-Empty in Mahayana Buddhism, we will aim to unpack them in a subsequent article.

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